

Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City)

August 25, 2003, Monday

SECTION: WIRE; Pg. A01

LENGTH: 832 words

HEADLINE: Western states seek 'rightful' **education** funds

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BODY:

It's been more than a year since a handful of Utah lawmakers announced an ambitious plan to bring billions of **education** dollars to Utah and surrounding Western states.

While the **Action Plan for Public Lands and Education** has gained momentum faster than some had predicted, supporters still have to take on Congress to get what Utah House Speaker Marty Stephens, R-Farr West, and others say is rightfully Utah's: \$836 million in one-time revenue and \$292 million a year from the federal government that schools are losing because of federal land policies.

Since July 2002, eight of 13 Western states, as well as a number of organizations, have pledged their support of the APPLE initiative.

"The response has been overwhelmingly positive," said Rep. Steve Urquhart, R-St. George, vice-chairman of the APPLE steering committee. "This thing's going a lot faster than I thought it would."

Urquhart, Stephens, Sen. Tom Hatch, R-Panguitch, and others, including members of local **education** boards, have been traveling to Council of State Governments-WEST meetings, visiting with Western leaders and talking to peer organizations about the concept.

So far, the Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Wyoming and Utah legislatures have passed resolutions backing the idea.

Resolutions from California, Alaska, Washington and Colorado are expected but still pending. Hawaii stands to gain significantly less from the deal than other Western states and has less motivation for joining the fight.

Groups championing the initiative include the board of directors of the Western Governors Association, the Utah State Board of **Education**, the Utah Taxpayers Association and the National **Education** Association.

Kent Briggs, executive director of CSG-WEST, a multi-state legislative council that is lobbying for APPLE, said the initiative has experienced bipartisan support and little opposition.

"It has hit a nerve," he said. "It's kind of an issue that's found an audience."

It's no wonder. If the initiative comes to fruition, the federal government would pay

out \$14 billion along with \$6.4 billion a year to compensate for states' lost funds, money that would come from federal revenue growth rather than land sales.

Lawmakers are seeking the money because they say Utah's educational funding woes -- as well as school budget problems in other Western states -- are largely a result of large federal holdings in the West.

In the 11 Western states, plus Hawaii and Alaska, the federal government owns an average of 52 percent of the land, compared with an average of 4 percent of land in other states. States can't collect taxes or receive full royalties from developing natural resources on that land.

The initiative also proposes a land exchange program, which would cost the federal government nothing but would help states unlock potential revenue sources through swapping non-wilderness lands.

While the issue is unique to the West, Stephens said Eastern states have not been entirely unreceptive.

"Certainly they're not as gung-ho about it as Western states, but they see the problem," Stephens said.

The next step in the process, however, may be a tougher sell. Meetings will be held in October among the state leaders to discuss how they can best pitch the idea to Congress.

"We're under no illusions about the difficulties that will pose, given the budget," Briggs said.

It may be sponsored in both bodies simultaneously, or be co-sponsored by a Democrat and Republican, said Stephens, who is chairman of the APPLE steering committee.

"We're probably talking about a two- or three-year time line to have it work its way through Congress," he said.

APPLE backers say although it may take time, it can be done.

Legislation for the initiative could be used as a bargaining tool or be packaged with something else, Stephens said. It may also be an issue in the presidential race, so as candidates make their rounds to Western states, they'll be grilled about their awareness of the issue and their commitment to solving the problem, Stephens said.

Also, beginning this fall Stephens will be the 2003 president of the National Conference of State Legislators.

"I think it could be very helpful," he said. "I'll get in front of the people I need to."

And as the population continues to boom in the West, there will be more political power behind the initiative, Urquhart said. The census shows the nation's population growth has been shifting westward, as the fastest-growing states in the nation during the last decade were in the West.

Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Utah and Idaho were the top five fastest-growing states in the 1990s, with Utah increasing by 29.6 percent. Nationally, the population grew 13.1 percent, and many states in the East grew by 5 or 6 percent -- or less.

To Urquhart, that means it's just a matter of time. "We're going to prevail on this issue," he said, "there's no doubt."